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STATE FOR Crisis Management Support Joseph Kowlaski, Patrick Clerkin  
and Lisa Gisvold

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TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [KSTH](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: Sierra Leone: Exercising Avian Influenza Response Plans

REF: A. STATE 22991 B. 06 Freetown 120 C. 05 Freetown 928

¶1. Summary: Sierra Leone launched a National Avian Influenza Emergency Preparedness and Response Action Plan in June 2006, but resource constraints have prevented effective implementation or testing. An Avian Flu Action Committee meets every few weeks, under the authority of the Avian Influenza Secretariat. A World Bank funded team of WHO experts completed an assessment mission to Sierra Leone in February 2007 and their report is expected in late March. Although Sierra Leone has carried out no Avian Flu simulation exercises, in 2006 birds were sent to a UK lab for testing in the wake of a suspected Avian Flu outbreak; results were negative. End Summary

#### The Sierra Leone National Action Plan

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¶2. During a March 1 visit with the Ministry of Agriculture, DCM met with the Dr. Samuel Carew, Coordinator of the Avian Flu Action Committee, the Acting Director of the Livestock Division, Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, Francis Sankoh, and the Agriculture Ministry Laboratory Director, Dr. Mohamed Barrie. All said that lack of resources has severely constrained Sierra Leone's ability to monitor and test the country's effectiveness in combating an outbreak of Avian Influenza. They also acknowledged serious gaps in the National Action Plan, launched in June 2006. The Action Plan identifies high risk areas for Avian Influenza in Sierra Leone and traces migratory bird patterns.

¶3. The 2006 Report of the National Avian Flu Secretariat outlines actions undertaken in the past year to prepare for a possible outbreak and identifies further needs. Sierra Leone has conducted a limited Avian Flu awareness campaign. Some posters and leaflets have been distributed and local health monitors have been taught to be alert to warning signs of potential outbreaks of Avian Influenza. Nevertheless the GoSL has little ability to monitor, test, or sustain a robust education campaign in local languages. Given adequate resources, they would expand sustained surveillance and monitoring through collection of samples in high risk areas.

¶4. With the assistance of international partners, such as FAO, OIE, UNDP and regional USAID support, GoSL technical experts have been able to take advantage of regional and international conferences. Some equipment has been provided to help restore a lab destroyed during the civil war. However, the Lab Director, Dr. Barrie, stated that he still lacks the resources for adequate evaluation. The Lassa Fever Laboratory in Kenema could, in a pinch, provide some diagnostic help, he said.

¶6. At the request of the GoSL, a World Bank Funded WHO technical team visited Sierra Leone in late February to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the national action plan and identify priority areas for assistance. The final report is expected at the end of March 2007.

Inter-Ministerial Committee on Avian Influenza

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¶7. DCM also met with the chair of the Inter-Ministerial committee on Avian Influenza, Minister of Health and Sanitation, Abattor Thomas. In late 2005, Minister Thomas took the lead in calling together an inter-ministerial meeting to discuss Avian Flu preparedness. (Ref C). While acknowledging the need for continuous vigilance, Minister Thomas admitted that since then the Committee had not met on a regular basis and said that the National Action Committee was better able to advise on preparations. Avian Influenza concerns, she said, tended to recede when addressing some of the immediate health threats that Sierra Leoneans face. (Comment: Sierra Leone suffers from an appalling lack of health facilities and resources, and has the highest child and maternal mortality rate in the world. Devoting scarce resources to Avian Influenza preparedness is unlikely to be as high a priority as tackling mortality statistics or combating endemic diseases in Sierra Leone, such as Malaria, Typhoid and HIV-AIDS. End Comment)

#### Testing the National Action Plan

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¶8. While GoSL officials have not conducted simulations to test the effectiveness of the National Action Plan, they have confronted the reality of a potential outbreak. In February 2006, the GoSL, with logistical help from the Embassy, investigated suspicious poultry deaths on the remote Turtle Islands. (Ref B) A UK lab determined that the samples tested inconclusive for Avian Influenza. According the 2006 Annual Report, similar unusual poultry deaths were tested in the UK later in the year, with negative results.

¶9. Sierra Leone does not maintain a web site with Avian Influenza information.